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Although pretend play has long been part of the early childhood curriculum, recent emphasis on accountability in education seems to have led to a decline in the general understanding of the contribution that high-quality play can make to children's cognitive development in the early years. This digest defines the cluster of concepts related to pretend play and cognition, briefly synthesizes the latest research on the role of pretend play in children's social and linguistic competence, and discusses challenges and policy directions suggested by these research findings. (Contains 12 references.) (KB)

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Pretend Play and Young Children's Development

Doris Bergen

Although pretend play has long been part of the early childhood curriculum, recent emphasis on accountability in education seems to have led to a decline in the general understanding of the contribution that high-quality play can make to children's cognitive development in the early years. This Digest defines the cluster of concepts related to pretend play and cognition, briefly synthesizes the latest research on the role of pretend play in children's social and linguistic competence, and discusses challenges and policy directions suggested by these research findings.

Concepts Related to Pretend Play and Cognition

Children begin to engage in pretend play, develop receptive and expressive language, and use mental representation at approximately the same time in their development. Thus researchers have hypothesized strong relationships among these processes. Pretend play requires the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically; it is carried out through interactive social dialogue and negotiation; and it involves role taking, script knowledge, and improvisation. Lillard (1998) has pointed out that pretend play involves negotiation between players with differing views, simultaneous representation of objects in two ways (real and pretend), role play requiring acting out others' thoughts and actions, and portrayal of emotions appropriate to varied situations and actors—all actions that suggest that the pretenders have mental representation abilities. However, substantial research on how children understand the thinking of others indicates that even though children can pretend through actions earlier, they do not gain the ability to understand that others may not know what they know until they are age 4 or 5.

Many cognitive strategies are demonstrated when children pretend, including joint planning, negotiation, problem solving, and goal seeking. Researchers have questioned whether the co-occurrence of these developing abilities is evidence of a reciprocal or of a cause-effect relationship. Although the answer to this question is still under study, it is clear that pretend play has a vital role in young children's lives, and that its importance extends through the primary school years as well (Bergen, 1998).

Research on Play and Social and Linguistic Competence

Because pretending involves language use and takes place in social contexts, the findings of many recent studies of pretend play shed light on the social and linguistic competence vital for school success. In an extensive observational study of pretend play, Sawyer (1997) found that, rather than following a script, much of preschool children's pretend play involved improvisational exchanges. He also found that these strategies were more successful when they were implicitly included in the play scenario rather than when children stopped the play to make explicit suggestions. He provides rich examples of the skill children exhibit in using improvisation in pretend play.

Nonsocial Play Behaviors. The movement from simple to complex social pretend play does not occur smoothly for some children. For example, Rubin and Coplan (1998) report on a series of studies that followed children who exhibited nonsocial or "withdrawn" play behaviors during preschool. They found that early social withdrawal is a strong predictor of peer rejection, social anxiety, loneliness, depression, and negative self-esteem in later childhood and adolescence. Nonsocial play behaviors also seem to have negative implications for academic success. The researchers state that the consequences of social withdrawal may vary by culture: there may be more negative consequences for boys in U.S. culture, compared to boys in other cultures where passive, controlled, and reticent behavior is valued (e.g., China). Gender differences in play may also affect kindergarten adjustment, with boys who have solitary-passive play behaviors and girls who have solitary-active play behaviors being rated as more poorly adjusted by teachers (Coplan et al., 2001).

Socioeconomic Factors. The process of pretend play development may also be affected by socioeconomic factors. Observations at two time periods of the play of children participating in Title I preschool programs in 22 classrooms did not show the same increase in social pretend play in similar time periods that is typically found in most preschool studies (Farran & Son-Yarbrough, 2001). This finding is disturbing because in this study, associative play, in which children interact briefly, had the most positive relationship to quantity of verbal behaviors, but over the two time periods, associative play decreased while parallel play, in which children play along side others but do not interact, showed an increase.

This trend was most evident in Title I preschool classrooms enrolling the largest proportion of children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. There was also no increase in the total amount of verbal interaction over the two time periods, which is incongruent with most research. Because an increase in social pretend play and language use were not observed, the researchers express concern that such preschools may "facilitate the behavioral introduction to the expectations of the public school environment but may not provide the foundational understandings and experiences to keep those early successes from disappearing once the curriculum becomes more demanding" (Farran & Son-Yarbrough, 2001, p. 259).

Children with Disabilities. Researchers studying children who have disabilities have pointed out the importance of social

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pretend play for these children's development and the difficulties they often have in engaging in social pretend play. Odom, McConnell, and Chandler (1993) found that teachers reported that about 75% of children with disabilities need assistance with social skills. However, in a review of research on the pretend play skills of children with language disabilities, Casby (1997) concluded that the actual differences in pretend play abilities of these children compared with the general population of students appears to be quite small; they have "a symbolic *performance* deficit more so than a symbolic *competence* deficit" (p. 477).

Similarly, Guralnik and Hammond (1999) found that children with mild disabilities exhibit play transition patterns (i.e., from solitary to parallel to social) that are congruent with those of typical peers. On the other hand, the social and pretend play patterns of children with autistic disorders are likely to differ from those of other children. These children may lack the mental representation and language competencies needed for pretend play, or lack skill in generating ideas for pretend play spontaneously (Jarrold, Boucher, & Smith, 1996).

Hestenes and Carroll (2000) observed an inclusive classroom with approximately equal numbers of typically developing children and children with disabilities. They found that those without disabilities engaged in more cooperative and less solitary play than did those with disabilities. Although both groups of children chose similar activities, typically developing children interacted less often with children with disabilities than expected. They suggest that, while effects of inclusive settings on play patterns of children with disabilities are not yet clear, such settings do not appear to disrupt the play of typically developing children. Special educators often use play intervention methods such as script rehearsal to promote young children's pretend play abilities, because of the relationships suggested by research between enhanced play skills and enhanced cognitive, social, and language development (Neeley et al., 2001).

Challenges and Policy Directions Suggested by Research

Research on the relationships between play and cognitive development gives some support to play-based curricula in programs for children under age 5. Implications for the primary years are not clear. State and national emphasis on test performance has resulted in the elimination of kindergarten "choice" time and recess breaks in some schools. The press for "academic readiness" through concentrated and direct teaching of alphabet, number, color, and other skills now affects the amount of time allocated for play in preschools. This trend could have a negative effect on the development of social pretend play, which requires extended uninterrupted time periods to develop complexity.

Policy makers need help in understanding the relationship between play and the development of cognitive skills. The research evidence is very clear that play has a role in young children's general development. Proponents of play must be ready to demonstrate how the development of the cognitive skills exercised in pretend play are also essential for later school success and good test performance.

Most of the present research evidence has come from small-scale cross-sectional studies; another challenge to researchers is to mount more extensive and practice-oriented studies (preferably longitudinal) to investigate play/cognition relationships in diverse early childhood settings. The limited research evidence that does exist suggests that educators should resist policies that reduce time for social pretend play experiences in preschool and work to increase funding for research on relationships between play and cognitive development in the early childhood years.

For More Information

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